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Contextual Study

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THE EXPERIMENTAL CLOWN

This essay will examine:

1. Historical, philosophical and cultural referencing of the Avant-garde and other experimental genres.
2. How some artists have challenged conventional views concerning identity. This includes: How individual artists work within the scope of otherness. And how the artist perceives their own self in relation to how society deems them.
3. How the Post-modern or perceived body drifts across both organised Government borders and wild frontiers of the Dark net and cyberspace.
4. How my art practice feeds into this.

ART PRACTICE

In what Guy Debord calls "*The government of the spectacle*" (Debord, 1967) he states that it is they who now possess all means to falsify the whole of production and that governmental perception has become the absolute master of memories (Debord, 1967). My field of enquiry and practice is concentrated in Lo-budget film and animation, and stands in opposition to Debord's statement. I believe in the 1980s, home video equipment and cheap video cameras took filmmaking to a wider audience. Thus enabling for a new shift in cinema, where both professional and amateur filmmakers, grew in a tandem with the birth of the world wide web. From 2000 onwards, mobile phone cameras and free apps made filmmaking available to the masses. I would

argue that it is the masses who are now the absolute masters of memories. A decentralised Internet of things promises to provide a perfect anarchic hybrid for the distribution of art, anti-art and moving image. To imagine the new, we only need imagine the character '*Bartleby*' (Melville, 1853) in power.

THE CAVE

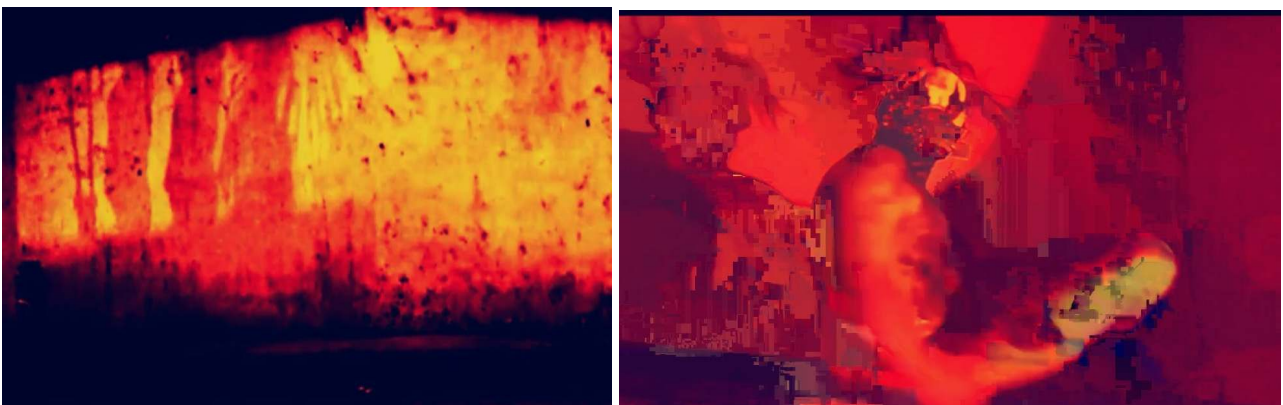
In 517 B.C. the Greek philosopher Plato (427 – 347 B.C.) wrote '*The Allegory of the Cave*' (*The Republic*, 375 B.C.). Plato's tale asks that we imagine a cave setting, in which there are prisoners bound to a rock, their heads are tied in such a way that they cannot look at anything but the wall in front of them. The cave becomes a metaphorical womb where philosophy was born and Plato foresaw the coming of cinema. It is a place where human voices began telling stories as shadows flickered against a wall.

Plato's tale is grounded in the visual history of cave art. On the Indonesian island of Sulawesi can be found the *Leang Tedongnge* cave which dates back 45,000 years to the Upper Palaeolithic Age. It is within this cave, that the Archaeologist Basran Burhan, a Griffith University PhD student, in 2017 discovered the world's oldest-known representational artwork. The painting is made with red ochre pigment and shows a naturalistic depiction of three Sulawesi warty pigs, two of which appear to be fighting. The cave painting lights up the morning of our species by hinting at a human need to connect to our environment. Humankind was at the beginning of a long road which led to the dawning of the mystical homo maximus. At the same time it began to develop a concept concerning the separation between art and nature.

In 1941 the English scholar Francis Macdonald Cornford (1874 – 1943) translated and commented on '*The Republic*', comparing Plato's cave to underground cinema (Loughlin, 2000, p.39). For Loughlin, Plato's tale assumes that one can see the distinction between the interior shadows of the cave and exterior reality (Loughlin, 2000, p.42).

The Film-lecturer, James Mooney states that there is “a very important distinction between the prisoners in the cave and modern cinema goers, in that Plato's prisoners are unaware of the fact what they see is mere shadow and illusion – they take this to be reality.” (Mooney, 2013). Despite the technological marvel of modern cinema, film goers are able to differentiate between the worlds depicted on screen and the world outside the movie theatre. Film itself has not led to the erasure of our physical bodies. However, today's avatars in a culture of hyper-connectivity, take us one step nearer to transcendence.

Continuing with the discourse surrounding Plato's cave, the American artist Robert Smithson (1938 – 1973) envisioned the “ultimate film goer would be a captive of sloth. Sitting constantly in a movie house, among the flickering shadows, his perception would take on a kind of sluggishness. He would be a hermit dwelling among the elsewheres, foregoing the salvation of reality. Films would follow films, until the action of each one would drown in a vast reservoir of pure perception. He would not be able to distinguish between good or bad films, all would be swallowed up into an endless blur.” (Smithson, 1971, p.3). It is within this endless blur that Plato's metaphysics influences the whole of Western philosophy. Metaphysics is the notion that an underlying truth exists, that can only be seen through the mind's-eye. Hence, we should look beyond the images presented.



The above images are taken from two of my works that are directly inspired by Plato's cave.

1. O Captain! (Cleeland, 2018)
2. Digital Caves (Cleeland, 2021)

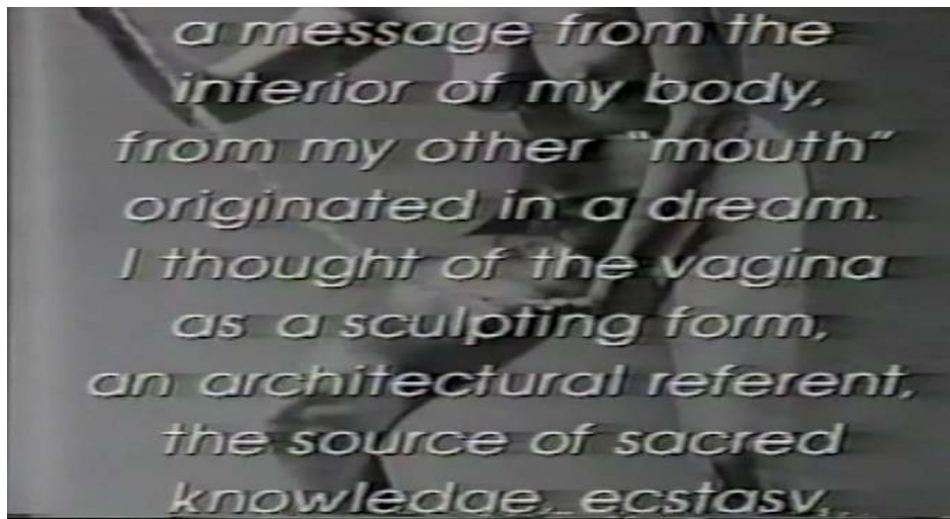
Both works build on the idea of there being transcendence and transgression. The function of the clown offers a distortion. Shot purposefully in low light and in low quality, the clown's body

becomes genderless. The performance is an integral part of these finished works, as it is through the mimetic, that action is confronted by a metaphysical release from the very act of transgression. Sploshing about in my urine and blood mixed with dirty dishwater, takes on a primordial shamanic aspect. There is no need for words. Art becomes the transcendence, and I would like to think that the camera captures this defining relationship.

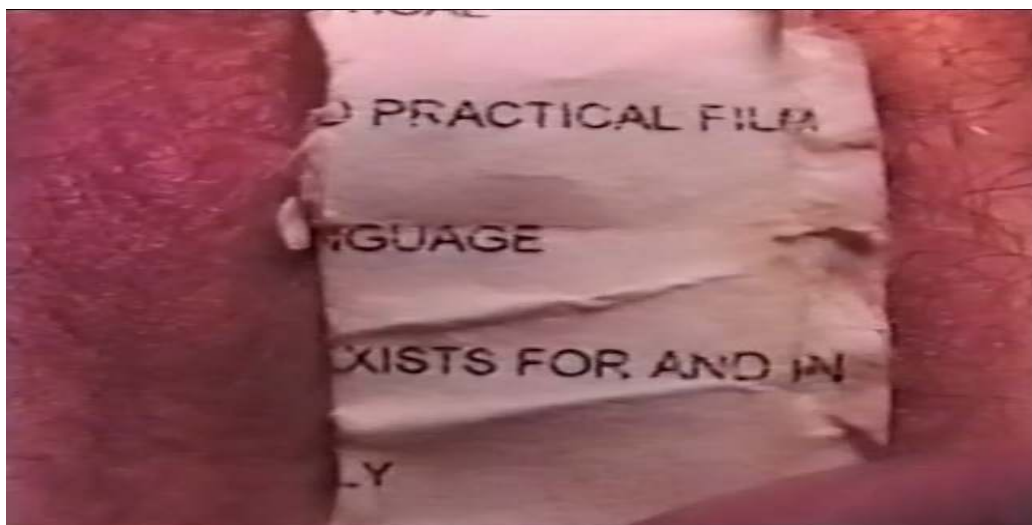
GENDER

Carolee Schneemann (1939 – 2019) was an American artist whose works challenged taboos and tradition. Her art and writings cross-examine themes such as cultural biases within art history, identity, gender and sexuality. Her work '*Interior Scroll*' (a solo performance enacted twice – 1975 - 1977) is considered by many to be a fundamental feminist performance piece. The work examines the relationship of woman's complete control over all forms of her expression. Staging “the inescapable mediation of the female body across numerous cultural vectors including photography, film criticism, fine art, and history.” (Horne, 2020, p.1003). The work is echoed by the French writer Helene Cixous: “Woman must write herself... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (Cixous, 1976, p.875 - 893).

In 1995, in an underground cave, Schneemaan and a group of seven women performed '*Interior Scroll – The Cave*' (Schneemaan, 1995). '*The Cave*' was shot by Maria Beatty who is a professional submissive and erotic filmmaker. Beatty's camera moves from shots of the group painting their bodies to close-ups/extreme close -ups of each woman extracting a scroll from their vagina. The women read the unravelling texts aloud. The words are taken from a letter of rejection to Schneemann, written by a male structuralist film maker. The voices overlap as the women read and the listener gains a fragmented knowledge of the content. Lingering on words and half sentences; by changing the hierarchy, the listener is endowed with a new knowledge.



3. Still image taken from Schneemann's '*Interior Scroll – The Cave*' (Beatty, 1985)



4. Still image taken from Schneemann's '*Interior Scroll – The Cave*' (Beatty, 1985)

The French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray commented: "assertive female sexuality has been erased or misrepresented in western philosophical tradition due to its being rooted in a Platonic illusionist 'stage setup'." (Irigaray, 1985, p.245). Irigaray further comments that the prisoners in Plato's cave are unable to visualize the womb from which they came.

In the 1960s and 1970s women artists explored self-expression using their physical bodies to express their difference from men. Hannah Wilke (1940 - 1993) was concerned with "...the creation of a formal imagery" (Warr, 2000, p.256) that was specifically female. Her art was trying to fuse the mind and body. According to Wilke, her 1978 video performance '*Intercourse*' was about creating positive imagery "...to wipe out the prejudices, aggression [...] fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy" (Warr, 2000, p.256) and cunt. Stating: "As a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America. Starification-scarification... Jew, black, Christian, Muslim... Labelling people instead of listening to them... judging according to primitive prejudices... Sticks and stones break our bones, but names more often hurt us." (Williams, 2019).

In an exhibition of self-portrait photographs, Wilke appears naked except for high heels, posing with a gun in some run-down spaces. The photographs had quotations overlaid on them that were taken from male philosophers' texts commenting on Art and Society. Wilke's idea was that her naked body seen with the text would force the viewer to question assumptions of the female body. After being diagnosed with cancer, Wilke began documenting the stages of her illness by posing for photographs that mimicked the classic nude. The photographs showed her bloated and bruised body.

It is interesting the fact what people will find acceptable and moreso when we frame it historically. In much of my own photographic work where I document myself, I am totally aware of how an audience will read the work. How I can be subtle in my exploitation of the viewer or totally over the top. Often the 'real' is missed and the focus will be on the 'not' real. The real is dismissed as being not real and vice versa.

It has not only been art and movie images that have challenged western and non-western traditions. Traditions have also been challenged by web based text, grammar and uncensored content. An early example of this can be seen in the first wave of Cyber- feminism in the 1990s. The online artist da Rimini using a number of avatars and spaces, *Gash Girl*, *doll yoko*, *The Realm of The Puppet* and *GenderFuckMeBaby* challenged the traditions of text, bucking the male

female dichotomy born out of western philosophical tradition. For da Rimini this “was an experiment, a game” (da Rimini, 2017) which manifested “through collaborative writing, mainly with people who were unknown to me in my embodied life” (da Rimini, 2017). These collaborative works were something made possible to produce because the Network File System removed restrictions for commercial web traffic. The first web browsers opened allowing for a de-physicalized space and experience that enabled artists to explore new structures of thought and approaches to art practice. Today this continues with non-fungible tokens, the Dark web, deep fakes and hacking. All of which find a place in my art.

UNDERGROUND

The artist and filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek (1927 – 1984) started working at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the advanced visual studies department in 1965. Vanderbeek anticipated the role that computers would have on art as technology developed. No longer would artists have to be locked in a studio with a paintbrush working solitary. Now computers would give artists a choice, they could become part of an electronic matrix working with other people. Vanderbeek was the first to use the term '*Underground*' in connection with film artists. In his manifesto '*The Cinema Delimina: Films from the Underground*', written for Film Quarterly (1961), he used the term to describe fellow American filmmakers at that time working under the umbrella of the avant-garde and experimental genres.

My first introduction to Underground movies and animation was in the late 1980s. Dr Pat Bidmead invited me to stay for one week with her family at The Brotherhood Church in Stapelton, North Yorkshire, England. Origins of The Brotherhood Church go back as far as 1887, to a young preacher named John Bruce Wallace. He was influenced by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy's denunciations of war and economic slavery. He moved from Limavady, Northern Ireland to London, England and squatted a derelict church. This became known as The Brotherhood Church and it welcomed all who believed in non-violence. Later a splinter group moved north to

Leeds. It is ex-members of that group who bought a seven acre small-holding and set up The Brotherhood Church in Stapelton in 1921.

My visit coincided with a '*Strawberry Tea*' which is a yearly event organised at The Brotherhood Church to raise funds. I met with Len Gibson (1919 – 2007) and his wife Hilda Gibson (1929 – 2016) who were the organisers. Len had been a member of the '*Committee of 100*' (1960 – 1968) which had been set up by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Len showed me around the small-holding and introduced me to his work with the Peace Pledge Union's Film van. Len "toured the UK in the summers, parking in town centres and visiting agricultural shows, and showing 10 – 15 minute peace films. The aim was to reach beyond the already sympathetic audiences who normally turned up for peace marches and gatherings and to bring peace films to the people" (Alston, 2014, p.225 – 226).

The film van introduced me not only to anti-war movies and animation, but also to the idea that moving image could be underground. Movies could be subversive! They could also be screened outside the comfort zone of home television and cinema houses. If the aim of the film van was to reach a wider audience, it succeeded. Many of the works that Len showed on the van, such as *The Sneetches* (Seuss, 1961), *Neighbours* (McLaren, 1952) and an assortment of short documentaries and European animations, later influenced my own movies. In 2017, I made a short anti-war movie (*Human Devastation*) for the Indonesian noise artist Theo Nugraha to use as a backdrop for his live performances. The work employs cut-out animation and drawing onto film. Techniques that I had seen in many of the movies shown on the PPU film van. More recently, I used cut-out *Sneetches* (Suess, 1961) in my Covid-lockdown collaboration '*The Sick Clown of Asia*' (Cleeland, 2021).



5. Film Van, newspaper cutting (Waterford News & Star, 1981)

6. Film Van, unknown location (The Brotherhood Church Archives, 198?)



3. Foetus, Cut out animation, (*Human Devastation*, Cleeland, 2017)

4. Anti war movie, Public Domain Image (*Human Devastation*, Cleeland, 2017)



5. Sneetches (*The Sick Clown of Asia*, Cleeland, 2021)

In the middle of June 2021, *The Sick Clown of Asia* was chosen to be screened at an abandoned industrial area in Athens, Greece. Duncan Reekie, in his PhD dissertation writes that the “Avant-garde developed from the conviction [...] Art should have a moral and social function in the founding of a new utopian society” (Reekie, 2004, p.58). The guerilla screenings in Athens were made by a group that have chosen to promote a homeless mobile cinema. It is as Duncan Reekie would suggest, best “understood as an opposition to both feudal order and to the bourgeois economy.” (Reekie, 2004, p.58). It is fitting that the *Sneetches* (Seuss, 1961) found a way into my clown movie. At a time when authoritarianism, racism and intolerance are on the rise. *Sneetches* describes the importance of treating people not based on their appearance and more so treating everyone with respect. The main organiser behind the homeless cinema, had originally given his time to do part of the voice over in *The Sick Clown of Asia*. It is interesting for me to see how a work can grow and find meaning. If it finds itself being screened on an abandoned building amongst an audience that dreams of a new utopia in a post-Covid world, I am all for that. For the academic Duncan Reekie this “negation of function is the central doctrine” (Reekie, 2004, p.58) that fuels the Avant-Garde. It is historically linked to “Art for Art’s Sake movement of the 19th century and the Aesthetic movement of the late 19th century.” (Reekie, 2004, p.58).

AVANT-GARDE - WWII

The avant-gardist Hans Richter's (1888 – 1976) movie '*Ghosts Before Breakfast*' (Richter, 1928) is an experimental German Dadaist work that was banned by the Nazis. According to Richter: “The Nazis saw straight away that if objects could get out of control... people could become out of control.” (Chodorov, 2012). I attempt to deal with this same phenomena in one of my latest works, where I wash the Chinese flag. The washing of a flag can be read as a political statement - as in an act of protest, Peruvian women in 2000 gathered in Lima’s main plaza, to wash the country’s soiled flag and dirty politics. For the majority of viewers of my ‘washing’ work, they see

only the action, they do not question any deeper meaning behind the act. They do not see the political implications.

In James Newton's book '*The Anarchist Cinema*' (2019) it is pointed out that: "The rethinking of the political implications surrounding film was not confined to Europe. The same practices of radical and political cinema in the European tradition were also present in the underground film scene in America. Cinema 16, a private members' film society in New York created and curated by Amos Vogel, was a series of weekly screenings made up of rare, underground, or avant-garde and experimental work. In the years that it was active, from 1947 until 1963, Vogel introduced the work of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Hans Richter" (Newton, 2019, p.216) among others, who were active in the postwar avant-garde movement.

When European filmmakers were heading for the U.S.A., the American filmmaker Robert Breer (1926 – 2011) left for France in 1949. Breer's movies were unconventional and some of his early non-narrative works employed frame by frame experiments. He recalls, at a screening in Paris, someone coming up to him and saying that *his* (Breer's) movie was destroying their vision. (Chodorov, 2012).

The language describing experimental animation often characterizes the genre as non-normative, unconventional, non-narrative, nonsensical and by its 'not'. This linguistic message that is forever present, polarizes my work. Directing it always to an audience that is interested in what it is not.

In the words of the French Lettrist filmmaker Maurice Lemaitre (1926 - 2018): "There's just film... in which some people make shit, some people make soup". (Chodorov, 2012).

UNDERGROUND – An American perspective

The late David Wojnarowicz (1954 – 1992), was an American performance artist and filmmaker involved in '*The Cinema of Transgression*'. The term '*Cinema of Transgression*' was coined by the

American filmmaker Nick Zedd in 1985 to describe his own movies and those of his peers who were also making movies in New York. Using the pseudonym Orion Jeriko he self-published '*The Underground Film Bulletin*' (1984 – 1990). It is here that the '*Cinema of Transgression*' published its Manifesto:

“We refuse to take their easy approach to cinematic creativity; an approach which ruined the underground of the sixties when the scourge of the film schools took over. Legitimizing every mindless manifestation of sloppy movie-making undertaken by a generation of misled film students, the dreary media arts centres and geriatric cinema critics have totally ignored the exhilarating accomplishments of those in our rank – such underground invisibles as Zedd, Kern, [...] a new generation of filmmakers daring to rip out of the stifling straight jackets of film theory in a direct attack on every value system known to man” (Zedd, 1985).

Wojnarowicz said “For a period [...] of time I entered a circle of people who were attracted to forms and expressions of violence and bloodletting because these things contained some arguable truth when viewed or experienced against a backdrop of America” (Wojnarowicz, 1991). '*The Cinema of Transgression*' is best viewed as a socio-political response to the era of Ronald Reagan.

The youthful punky attitude of these movies is something that carried them at that time. Plus the fact that there was nothing else like them available. The bad acting also has a certain charm. Zedd's '*Cinema of Transgression*' manifesto doesn't read particularly original. It reads like a copy and paste job from many early artist manifestos written by the Futurists or Dada movements, that can be found on the library shelves of the prestigious Pratt Art Institution where Zedd attended. According to the film director John Waters: “Zedd wanted to be an underground celebrity at a time when there was no such thing as 'underground'”(Davies, 2014).

According to Julian Wolfrey “Transgression is [...] the act of breaking a law, committing a crime or sin, doing something illegal, or otherwise acting in some manner proscribed by the various forms or institutions of Law in societies , whether secular or religious, all of which have histories and which themselves are mutable, self-translating.” (Wolfrey, 2008).

In today's climate of art, porn and film the *Cinema of Transgression* looks outdated. For myself transgressional acts within my own work points towards the absurdity, the ongoing carnival of the situation. There is no longer any shock value to be seen in a freak show.

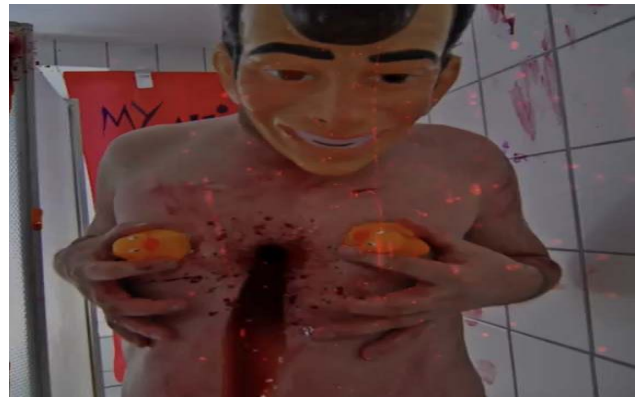
UNDERGROUND

I contacted the Iranian photographer Babak Haghi about his work. I had seen his photographs of the Iranian Butoh performer Behzad Gholami and wanted to ask about the risk factor of such performance work and capturing it. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic law forbids dance in public. Butoh performance is regarded as something obscene and of a dark nature. Hence, Gholami's performances occur underground. Haghi explained to me that it was impossible to exhibit his photographs in Iranian art galleries, due to the fact his photographs feature naked men. Haghi commented "his photographs have no artistic value within Iranian society" (Haghi, 2021) and that "he finds it difficult to make money as a photographer in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Haghi, 2021). The Internet becomes both Haghi's and Gholami's distribution point and allows for discussion with artists worldwide. Through Facebook I connected with both Babak Haghi and Behzad Gholami. Butoh performance has long played into much of my performance work. In 2019 I was fortunate enough to participate in a Butoh workshop in Tokyo with Master Daisuke Yoshimoto, who taught me body movements. It is something I still practice.



10. Butoh performance '*Existence*', Iran (Gholami, 2020)

11. Photo by Babak Haghi, Tehran, Iraq (2018)



12. Butoh performance '*Homeboy*' (Cleeland, 2020)

13. Butoh performance '*Homeboy*' (Cleeland, 2020)

In trying to understand the differences between calling a filmmaker 'Underground' as opposed to 'Avant-Garde', I reached out to academics who work in the area of film and media. See Appendix A. These two terms are often used intermingled. I find this distracts from the historical perspective. These days I wonder what it means when an artist labels themselves 'Underground' or 'Avant-Garde'?

RESISTANCE – I prefer not to

The story of '*Bartleby The Scrivener*' (Melville, 1853) introduces a character that shows no hate, no anger and no love. Bartleby's absence of affect both infuriates and interests his boss. At the same time his boss cannot understand Bartleby's malady. In the story, "Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" throws the workplace into total disarray." (Zizek, 2019). Bartleby is a threat to the natural order. He rejects reason. He looks at a wall and also he puts up a wall.

Zizek, offers an alternative reading of Bartleby. It provides a strategy for how to cope, with what the British cultural theorist Mark Fisher referred to as 'Capitalist Realism'. For Fisher 'Capitalist Realism' means, the numbing acceptance that there is no viable alternative to capitalism. Zizek formulates that *preferring not to* is one among the responses to global capitalism (Zizek, 2019).

My own conclusion of Bartleby's actions is that his progressive refusals, are an active, radical withdrawal from the world. His refusal is willful – a conscious resistance - a space where non-action becomes action. Bartleby understands his obligation is to disobey. However, the reader has no understanding of how Bartleby arrived at his knowledge. Every reader is forced to take their own path of preferring not to.

For me, that path leads to where the very act of resistance is forever present. Preferring not to becomes part of a larger philosophical equation which drives my art practice. The masked clown with the damaged psyche prefers not to behave.

A MASKED CLOWN

'*Death of a Chinese Clown*' (Cleeland, 2016) was shot in Xuchang, China by myself and a Chinese boy named Li, who worked for a local video company. The making of the movie coincides with a rising and more assertive China and plays into the creepy urban clown myth. In the October that I was filming an article titled '*The Creepy-Clown Hysteria*' (Widdicombe, 2016) appeared in The New

Yorker. It read that it made “sense that 2016, the year that an orange-hued man ran for office, is when clowns stopped being funny” (Widdicombe, 2016).

The opening scene of *'Death of a Chinese Clown'* introduces a clown dancing and menacingly waving two swords in a pagoda. In the background jets of water shoot into the night air. It is not clear if the strange French ditty being sung, is the voice of the clown on screen. The voice carries over to the next shot, which is a clown mask on a stone bench with a pair of metal nunchucks. Smoke is bellowing from the mask. The following shot sees the same clown in a city park at night playing on a cool looking electric bike. Harsh noise starts to drown out the French singing and we see the clown dancing and swinging a spade. In the next scene the clown attacks a woman from behind, dragging her to ground. The continuing noise builds a sense of destruction. Two ghoulish dolls walk towards the camera. A clown costume is hanging up in a bedroom. A clown is dressed in women's black stockings and a short black slip. The clown plays on the bed taking selfies. Harsh noise plays in the background, which makes the scene all that more disturbing. The movie continues with more violence and billowy coloured smoke – the clown killing, stabbing someone wearing a steam-punk mask.

I continued shooting clown movies in visits to China through to 2019. In one performance I made alone on a high-rise rooftop in the city centre, I was naked except for a mask and black wellington boots. I was swinging nunchucks and prancing about while filming, and a police drone went hovering over me. It circled the building and came back. I remained naked and tried to imagine a Chinese police person explaining to their superiors what the drone footage had captured.

My most recent clown movie was made under the Covid-lockdown in England. The short work was in collaboration with a homosexual Argentine performance artist who sent me a series of clown photos he had made. I used the photos for cut-out animation. The title of the work is *'The Sick Clown of Asia'* (Cleeland, 2021) which is a play on the sick man of Asia. The sick man of Asia is no longer the China man, it is the democratic West clambering over itself to do business in China. The work shows images of American Presidents in drag and features a large swinging

penis, blood pouring from eyes and an assortment of odd images. It seems that the creepy-clown as a political phenomenon, leads a carnival of spectacle and is here to stay. The ex-MP for Rutland and Melton (1992 – 2019), Sir Alan Duncan, in his book '*The Thick of It: The Private Diaries of a Minister*' (Duncan, 2021) describes the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson as “a clown, a self centred ego, an embarrassing buffoon, with an untidy mind and sub-zero diplomatic judgment” (Duncan, 2021).

I see my masked clown movies within part of a lineage of experimental moving image practice and counterculture, which includes: amateur cinema, media-terrorism, popular culture, gangster-art, anti-art, noise, and expanded cinema. Film as a subversive medium, still has the power to elude established channels, and forge new understandings of both our physical and online environments.

To quote Reekie: “I shall (re)define Underground Cinema [...] strategy of this (re)definition will be to liberate the Underground from the legitimate history of Art and (re)contextualise it into the illegitimate and subversive history of popular culture.” (Reekie, 2003, p.8).



14. Dancing Clown, '*Death of a Chinese Clown*' (Dir: Cleeland, 2016)



15. Transvestite Clown, '*Death of a Chinese Clown*' (Dir: Cleeland, 2016)



16. Killer Clown, '*Anarchy in China*' (Dir: Cleeland, 2019)

UNDERGROUND - Japan

My interest in Japanese art started in the 1980s and it is prominent in much of my work. I also collaborate with various Japanese artists. In March 2021, I had an online chat with the Japanese 'Pink' film director Yutaka Ikejima. I asked him about his career and thoughts about 'Underground' Japan.

JC:

Hello, you started in the entertainment business in the 1970s. What would you say has been the biggest change during that time?

YI:

I started out acting in an underground theatre group, which fused politics and art. In Japan this is called *Angura*. Originally I wanted to be a movie director. I wanted to enter the world of movies.

But at that time the Japanese movie industry was in a shambles. Every major studio was closed. These days, domestic cinema is a huge successful industry.

JC:

Was it easy for you to get into the film business?

YI:

The Japanese movie industry from the 1960s to the 1970s was at its worst. It was difficult to enter the world of movies other than Pink movies. Many of my fellow theatre actors were appearing in Pink movies. I was invited by a friend at that time, but I refused. However, when I was in my 30s I became tired of theatre. In 1981 I decided to enter the world of Pink cinema.

JC:

Can you tell me something about the Pink Film Industry?

YI:

When I made my debut as an actor in pink movies, there were nearly 300 Pink movies a year. However, by the time I made my directorial debut in 1991, there were only about 150 Pink movies being made a year. Nowadays, the number of Pink movies being produced is between 20 and 25.

JC:

Was you a fan of Pink Films before getting involved in them?

YI:

I wasn't a big fan. However, Pink movies were always looked full of energy. When I saw that film directors such as Koji Wakamatsu and Shinya Yamamoto were paying attention to the genre, I started watching with interest. There was similarities between *Angura* and Pink movies. Both came out of an underground counterculture.

JC:

How is the Pink genre viewed in Japan?

YI:

The heyday of Pink movies was from the 1970s to 1980s. There were Pink movie theatres in every town. However, by the end of the 1980s the Pink movie industry was in decline.

Nowadays, the general public thinks that Pink movies are dead!

JC:

Did the transition from shooting on film to shooting with digital formats change your approach to filmmaking?

YI:

This was a big change in the movie industry. In the case of making Pink movies with film, due to budget, simultaneous sound recording was not possible. This allowed me to shout out various instructions to actors while filming on set. Foley sound and actors lines were recorded and added afterwards in a studio. With digital, sound and image are generally recorded simultaneously. This restricts my on-set utterances while filming.

JC:

Does making pornography have a stigma in Japan? Is it associated with a particular group of people?

YI:

No, it belongs to Japanese society as a whole.

JC:

Would you say that there is a downside to making Pink Films?

YI:

These days it is a genre that is largely ignored. I would say that it is also impossible to get into the mainstream film industry from Pink movies.

JC:

How has the distribution of your movies changed over time?

YI:

In the 1980s, when I made my debut as an actor in a pink movie, there were numerous production and distribution companies. There was about 300 Pink movies made a year. In 1991, when I directed my first movie, the number had decreased to five companies: Shintohe, Kokuei, Excess, Okura, and ENK. The number of Pink movies being made had halved. Jump forward thirty years to the present and there is only one company that produces and distributes Pink movies, OP Eiga. I would say that about 20 Pink movies are now made each year.

Footnote:

1.

In 2011 I was an undergraduate in Film Studies at Kingston University, London. In my first week I was asked to write 250 words on a movie that I liked. I chose the '*Boiler Room*' (Beatty, 1998). I explained liking the work because it gave me a window into a sub-culture I knew very little about. At the time it was the most graphic hardcore Sado-masochist lesbian movie available in the U.S.A.

In the following lesson, it became obvious that tongues had wagged! The Director of Studies warned the class never to write about pornographic movies. I wondered what the academically revered Carolee Schneemann would have made of this? Schneemann had worked with Beatty, challenging taboos and reclaiming actions, ideas that history had denied women. Here, Beatty's work was being denied and silenced!

2.

In 2019 I visited Tokyo, Japan to make a short film. While there, the Japanese noise artist Seiei Jack and I exchanged homemade masks. I visited an art gallery, where I was given art work by the Japanese artist named Nibnibu. My plan was to use both the mask and artwork as props in the movie I was making.

From Japan I flew to Guangdong, China. On arrival at the airport I was asked by the Chinese police what I was carrying in my luggage. They asked if they could take a look and I said that was fine. Five minutes later I was being cordoned off and the contents of my suitcase emptied out. Nibnibu's art works were the first things to be confiscated, deemed of a pornographic nature and were put into bags and sealed with a red stamp. Next were manga books and postcards printed by a Japanese artist, all deemed indecent. I was allowed to leave the airport after signing a statement saying that I was sorry for having tried bringing unsuitable artworks into the People's Republic of China.

The artworks remain only visible as art in my movie '*Snapshots of Tokyo*' (Cleeland, 2019). I am currently working on editing a new version of this movie and plan on making it longer. It will include footage of a live performance that I made at the gallery where I first saw an exhibition of Nibnibu's artwork. I plan to include footage of Nibnibu creating an original piece based on my Chinese airport security experience. The work will act as a hybrid-diary.



17. Snapshots of Tokyo (Cleeland, 2019)

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7 & 8. Human Devastation

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17. Snapshots of Tokyo

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Appendix A:

ONLINE CONVERSATION (02/03/2021) BETWEEN MYSELF AND THREE ACADEMICS INVOLVED IN THE FIELD OF FILM STUDIES

Me: How would you all differentiate between calling a filmmaker 'Underground' as opposed to 'Avant-Garde'?

Fred Camper (<https://www.fredcamper.com/bio1.html>): I've given this issue, along with that of 'experimental', more thought than it perhaps deserves. I don't think 'underground' works at all today. It only barely worked in the 60s. It might work in a repressive country in which you could not really show your films. Our culture (America), whatever one thinks of it, has become too open and too diverse for this word. But I don't think 'avant-garde' works either. So much has been done; most filmmakers are working within existing traditions. Nor is 'experimental' of much use, except for a minority who, for better or for worse, feel that the word is right for them. A response to that word from one filmmaker decades ago: 'I made many experiments while working on this film. I left them behind in my editing room. What you will see is a finished work.'

On the other hand, just calling these works 'films' doesn't work either; your viewers will be disappointed to find no evidence of *Batman*, or *Luke Skywalker*, or similar. We need a neologism, but I have never found one.

Jonathan Walley (Association Professor <https://denison.edu/people/jonathan-walley>): I agree with everything Fred says here, with one exception, I guess. *Un Chien Andalou* (or *Mothlight*, or *Meshes of the Afternoon*, etc. etc. etc.) is still avant-garde to an 18-year-old hayseed in an intro film class. Generally 'avant-garde' is thought of as an historical designation and so, as Fred implies "It might work in a repressive country in which you could not really show your films", but I also tend to think of it as an effect. In that case, the relevant history is not global, but personal – the history of the hayseed. [I know "hayseed" is impolite, but I just mean it as blanket term for innocent eyes, and after all, I do teach in Ohio]. I do think that underground is more specific than experimental or avant -garde, with historically-bound connotations (certain variants of experimental film output of the 1960s into the early 1980s, with punk film and the *Cinema of Transgression* as examples). While I am wary of the implication of 'experimental' to which Fred alludes (as in, 'they're just experimenting; eventually they'll get it right'), I still think it's the least loaded, most neutral term to encompass a cinematic tradition that, if heterogeneous to the point of anarchy, is nonetheless discernible. 'Underground' and 'avant-garde' can be considered sub-categories, I suppose.

Fred Camper: Dear Jonathan, I mostly agree with what you wrote too, including your disagreement with me. You are getting at many important nuances. I'm not a huge fan of Rose Lowder's films, but when I heard her introduce her work as 'experimental' as in, 'I make these not certain of what I am going to get' I had to acknowledge, in accordance with my 'dogma' that there are no rules for making art, that her position is as valid as any other. Certainly seeing my first 'avant-garde' film at 15 felt like an 'avant- garde' experience, in that I had never seen anything like it. Most single screen work being made in decades since, however, does seem to be working, at least on a superficial viewing, within existing traditions. In my experience with young film students reared on a diet of YouTube and the rest, most are not all that surprised by anything.

Me: I appreciate what both of you have written. The avant garde is for me, largely as Jonathan mentioned 'intro film class' which I guess every film studies department briefly touches upon in the 1st year. Fred, the idea that 'Underground' could still work in a repressive country, is an interesting point.

Michael Sicinski (<https://www.uh.edu/class/media-and-the-moving-image/affiliate-faculty/michael-sicinski/>): James, to elaborate on Fred's point just a bit, 'underground' has a very specific meaning in, say, Chinese cinema. Official films must be submitted to a CCP censorship board. Only official films get released. But there are 'underground' filmmakers whose work circulates as samizdat, and is shown in unofficial festival settings. Many of the most lauded Chinese filmmakers, such as Jia Zhang ke and Wang Xiao Shuai, began underground, then 'became' official. There is a somewhat similar process in Iran.

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